

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

Can we find hope in Israeli-Palestinian peace talks?

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It has been more than nine months since Secretary of State John Kerry began the latest and perhaps failed attempt to open peace talks between Israel and Palestine.

While I am reluctant to venture into this very heated, confused and conflicted topic,

I am reminded of conversations I had last January while traveling in Israel and Palestine with a class from McCormick



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Rabbi Donniel Hartman is the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and has been a featured speaker at our last three Interfaith Dialogue events in Grand Rapids. I had the chance to meet with him while in Jerusalem, and our conversation was most helpful. Hartman urged that we change the prevailing narrative away from that of victimhood. We will never make progress if all we focus on is how much each party has been victimized. Only when we refocus to the topic of how each community can flourish can we then negotiate what is needed to insure a peaceful compromise.

In a recent blog post, Hartman tied his perspective directly to what it means to be a Jew: "If all human beings are created in the image of God, equal regardless of national, religious, ethnic or racial origin, what does that obligate us to do to the Palestinian people? If we belong to a tradition which teaches that what is hateful unto you, do not do unto others is the whole Torah, and that we are obligated to love the stranger precisely because we were strangers in the land of Egypt, how ought that to shape our policies toward the Palestinian people?"

While travelling in the West Bank, we had a similar conversation with Jean Zaru, a Palestinian

Christian born in Ramallah, a city north of Jerusalem that is predominately Muslim but about 25 percent Christian. It is considered the de facto administrative capital of the state of Palestine. Zaru is a leader of the local Quaker community and active worldwide on issues of peace and interfaith understanding. She said victims have no responsibility, because as victims, they become helpless and can do nothing. We, however, are not victims; we are children of God, made in God's image. We can act, we can take responsibility.

In her book, "Occupied with Nonviolence," she recounts how as a child of 8 years, she

experienced what Palestinians refer to as the "Nakba" or "Day of Catastrophe," when 750,000 Palestinians were made refugees during the creation of the state of Israel. While she might be tempted to live in that victim state, she refuses to do so but works tirelessly for peace. In her words: "Love of one's enemies forces me to recognize that my enemy, too, is a child of God."

Working for peace is not an easy assignment. It gives one hope to know that there are people living in Jerusalem and in the West Bank who have not given up but continue to see all people, even one's enemies, as "children of God."

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